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SUBJECT: SUDAN - NGOS AND GOS DELIVER OPPOSING MESSAGES IN
DISCUSSIONS WITH CODEL ISAKSON

REF: A) KHARTOUM 593
B) KHARTOUM 609

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) On May 25, Senators Johnny Isakson (R-Georgia) and Bob Corker (R-Tennessee) met with representatives from four non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Government of National Unity (GNU) Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs (MHA) officials to discuss the humanitarian situation in Sudan. NGOs highlighted insecurity, lack of access, and government restrictions on humanitarian programs as the key issues limiting remaining NGO work in Darfur. NGOs expressed gratitude for U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan ¶J. Scott Gration's engagement with the GNU on humanitarian operations in Darfur and northern Sudan's Three Areas, noting that following the Special Envoy's negotiations with the National Congress Party in early April, the government made some efforts to improve the operating environment. However, since that time, NGOs reported that much of the progress has dissipated, and little additional forward movement has occurred. In the view of many of the NGO representatives, commitments made by Government of Sudan (GOS) senior officials to the Special Envoy may have not been translated as instructions to technical-level staff in Khartoum or Darfur. For their part, MHA officials minimized the impact of the expulsions and reported that government ministries and other donors, such as China and the League of Arab States, are addressing gaps left by the 13 aid organizations expelled in early March. END SUMMARY.

Insecurity Threatens Remaining NGOs' Work

¶2. (SBU) According to the NGOs, insecurity remains one of the most significant factors limiting humanitarian work in Darfur. In January 2009, the UN reported that bandits hijacked approximately 277 humanitarian vehicles in 2008, compared to 137 vehicles in 2007. During the hijackings, assailants temporarily kidnapped 218 national staff in 2008, compared to 147 national staff in 2007. Exacerbating the already insecure environment, a new trend of international staff abductions has also emerged in 2009. Since March, unknown assailants have taken hostage and subsequently

released three international staff from Medecins Sans Frontieres/Belgium in North Darfur and two international staff from Aide Medicale Internationale in South Darfur, forcing these NGOs to suspend programs there. In addition, NGOs reported at least six kidnapping threats since March, limiting staff movement and access to program sites. (Note: Although all international staff were released unharmed through Sudanese government intervention, wide-spread suspicion exists among NGOs and other agencies that the government was involved or otherwise complicit in the abductions. Some observers have noted that the abductions may have been an attempt to intimidate international aid workers and discourage them from operating in rural areas of Darfur. End Note.) Compounding this situation, continuing conflict between the Sudanese government and armed opposition groups in North Darfur and insecurity along the Sudan-Chad border have limited humanitarian space and led to additional civilian displacements.

¶3. (SBU) In addition to violence and conflict, NGOs noted the important role of the media in the deteriorating security conditions in Darfur. Although the government's negative rhetoric towards NGOs decreased slightly in April, negative media messages continue to shape individuals' perceptions of international NGOs and erode humanitarian space. (Note: Following the expulsions, government officials, including Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, made inflammatory statements against international NGOs, describing them as "spies" who threatened Sudan's national security. While positive reports of NGO work have not increased, since the Special Envoy's engagement in April, government officials have taken a more conciliatory tone towards NGOs. End Note.)

¶4. (SBU) Due to continuing insecurity and the early March

KHARTOUM 00000695 002 OF 004

expulsions, the number of international staff operating outside of Darfur state capitals has significantly decreased. As of May 25, NGOs estimated that a maximum of 30 to 40 international staff were working in rural areas of Darfur, compared to several hundred in ¶2008. Limited international presence in rural areas of Darfur hampers NGOs' ability to monitor and report on gaps, as well as possibly having an impact on "humanitarian protection by presence."

In the latter regard, some argue that the presence of international actors serves as a deterrent to violence against civilians.

Addressing Gaps in Assistance

--NGO Perspectives--

¶5. (SBU) NGOs noted that remaining organizations are working to fill significant gaps created by the March 4 and 5 NGO expulsions. According to the NGOs, approximately 60 percent of the humanitarian capacity in Darfur and an estimated 90 percent of the humanitarian response capacity in the Three Areas was lost with the expulsions. However, the extent of the gaps in assistance in the Three Areas remains unclear, as the Three Areas assessment results have not yet been published. NGOs further noted the impact of the expulsions on NGO coordination since the majority of the expelled organizations were those that had the capacity to advocate for NGO issues and concerns. For instance, one-half of the NGO Steering Committee - the group that represents and coordinates with the 67-member NGO Forum - was expelled.

¶6. (SBU) NGOs noted concerns regarding the ability of "new" NGOs to quickly address gaps in assistance and uphold humanitarian principles. NGOs expressed doubt that the government would expedite registration of these NGOs, and felt that remaining NGOs should move forward with addressing gaps in the interim. (Note: This is also the strategy that USAID has adopted in the short-term. End Note.) NGOs further expressed concern regarding the close links between the arrival of the "new" NGOs and U.S. political engagement with the GNU. In their view, this action compromises the principle of neutrality, which forms the basis of humanitarian action, and could raise the risk of the "new" NGOs being targeted by the government for harassment. NGOs also highlighted that linkages between politics and NGOs' presence in Sudan could be used negatively in

other theaters, such as Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan, and place NGO workers at risk of attack by anti-American elements. Finally, NGOs stressed that the "new" NGO strategy could compromise the appeals process that some NGOs have initiated through the Sudanese legal system. (Note: Several NGOs appealed their early March expulsion; however, to date, the Sudanese government has ignored these appeals. End Note.) NGOs also noted that most of the expelled NGOs had worked in some way or other on sensitive issues such as gender-based violence or were vocal in their advocacy of human rights and protection issues. "New" NGOs, having affiliations with expelled NGOs, would not shed this perception easily and would likely encounter difficulties in registering with the government.

--Government Perspectives--

17. (SBU) In contrast to the NGO concerns, GNU officials, including new State Minister for Humanitarian Affairs Dr. Abdel Bagi El Gilani, GNU Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) Commissioner-General Hassabo Mohammed Abdel Rahman, and Director of the GNU HAC NGO Section Ahmed Adam, conveyed the message that the UN, remaining NGOs and government assistance agencies are adequately addressing gaps in assistance and minimized the impact of the expulsions. Commissioner-General Hassabo stated that the sense of crisis immediately following the expulsions was exaggerated, and claimed that the joint GNU-UN assessment had found limited gaps from the expulsions. For instance, Hassabo stated that out of the 908 health facilities in Darfur, expelled NGOs only operated 4.7 percent, or 43 facilities. However, USAID field staff note that this number does not take into account how many of the 908 health facilities were actually functional, and excludes mobile clinics that expelled NGOs operated in rural areas. Moreover, USAID staff underscore that the sites managed by expelled NGOs were among some of the most densely

KHARTOUM 00000695 003 OF 004

populated and required the highest-level of service delivery. Hassabo noted that following the expulsions the government sent doctors to the areas to ensure no interruptions in service delivery. (Note: The State Ministry of Health (SMOH) in West Darfur, at the direction of the federal MOH, has also expressed an unwillingness to admit the existence of gaps in the health system created by the expulsions. Per Ref B, in early May, the SMOH reported that government-supported initiatives, such as sending doctors from Khartoum and Egypt to Darfur, addressed the gaps created in the health sector. However, NGOs note that the doctors have largely been unwilling to travel to rural areas, where medical services are needed, and prefer to remain in Darfur on a short-term basis, most for only a few months. End Note.)

18. (SBU) Elaborating on this point, Hassabo reported that NGOs were only "pass-throughs" for food distributions and stated that local food relief committees had conducted the "real" distributions. (Note: Hassabo's remarks do not take into account the fact that although local food committees have assumed food distributions since the expulsions, the UN World Food Program stated that it does not want to continue this arrangement in the longer-term, as it does not permit adequate monitoring. End Note.)

19. (SBU) Dr. Gilani welcomed new U.S. NGOs to work in Sudan, noting that NGOs should isolate humanitarian work from political objectives. In line with previous discussions, government officials further highlighted the importance of complementing humanitarian assistance with recovery and development initiatives, as well as noted their ultimate goal of building national capacity to meet humanitarian needs and conducting voluntary internally displaced person (IDP) returns. Hassabo suggested that prolonged relief assistance creates dependency in IDP camps and discourages returns. Hassabo reported that 900,000 IDPs have returned to 611 villages and stated that NGOs should provide assistance to returnees, not only individuals in camps. (Note: This number and the nature of the returns have not been confirmed by UN agencies or NGOs. End Note.)

End of the "Honeymoon Period" for GNU Compliance?

--NGO Reports--

¶10. (SBU) While expressing gratitude for the work of Special Envoy Graton, NGOs noted that progress on several key issues, such as the issuance of one-year, multiple re-entry visas, has stalled. In addition, while the Special Envoy's framework included all of northern Sudan, GNU efforts to implement the framework, such as the issuance of the April 16 ministerial decree, have focused only on Darfur. According to the NGOs, most of the momentum created following the Special Envoy's early April negotiations has been eroded over the past few weeks, and many details remain unresolved. For instance, only one of the four NGOs attending the meeting had all of its technical agreements (TAs) signed by the federal-level HAC. NGOs noted inconsistent application of requirements for the TAs, with the HAC rejecting at least two USAID partner's TAs due to the fact that the NGOs did not have an "acceptable" national NGO partner. Per Ref A, NGOs previously reported that the HAC was unilaterally writing the names of national NGOs into TAs and pressuring international NGOs to accept the local partners. In previous years, NGOs were able to partner with informal, community-based organizations and government line ministries in addition to national NGOs to fulfill this requirement. However, in 2009, the HAC changed the requirement to include only national NGOs registered with the HAC as a way to expedite the process of "Sudanization." (Note: The HAC has completed TAs for some NGOs that do not have a national NGO partner. It is unclear why the HAC is imposing more stringent restrictions on some NGOs and not others. End Note.) Lack of a valid TA has prevented NGO staff from obtaining multiple re-entry visas and hampered NGO staff movement to program sites.

¶11. (SBU) NGOs continue to report trouble receiving one-year, multiple re-entry or exit visas. As of May 25, the NGOs had not

KHARTOUM 00000695 004 OF 004

heard of any NGO staff receiving one-year, multiple re-entry visas, and NGOs expressed doubt that the government would be able to comply with this commitment due to links between visa issuance and other bureaucratic requirements with varying timelines, such as resident visas and TAs (reftel A). At present, the government has only issued multiple re-entry visas for as long as permitted by the shortest approved timeline for the other requirements, often significantly less than the agreed-upon 12 months. (Note: At 500 USD, multiple re-entry and exit visas cost a significant amount more than single entry or exit visas. As the majority of multiple re-entry or exit visas have been issued for only six months, many NGOs find it more advantageous to use individual exit visas, which cost 100 USD per trip. End Note.)

¶12. (SBU) NGO staff also reported continuing trouble traveling to South Darfur using only a passport and HAC identification card, as stipulated in the 2007 Joint Communique and reinforced in subsequent agreements (reftel A). In a new trend, government officials have also limited the movement of national NGO staff in South Darfur. Although Sudanese nationals are not required to obtain permits for traveling within Darfur states, Sudanese security officials have recently detained Sudanese nationals lacking permits.

--Government Reports--

¶13. (SBU) GNU officials stressed that while the government has taken significant steps to facilitate NGOs' work in Darfur, the system is not perfect and requires additional time in order to function more efficiently. Ahmed Adam, Director of the GNU HAC NGO Section and Head of the Joint Procedures Center (JPC), noted government initiatives to streamline processes, including fast-tracking NGO procedures; issuing 29 presidential decrees; establishing the JPC, which assembles 18 ministries in one place to expedite NGO paperwork; and creating a web-based system for NGOs to track paperwork. (Note: As of May 25, no NGOs had received the passwords necessary to track procedures under the new web-based system. End Note.)

COMMENT

¶15. (SBU) While expressing appreciation for the positive influence of Special Envoy Gration's initiatives on the working environment in Sudan, NGOs stated that much of the forward momentum on the framework has stalled, and many of the government's commitments remain unfulfilled. Nearly two months after negotiations with the Special Envoy, it appears that implementation of several key initiatives is not moving forward rapidly, including the fast-tracking of new NGO registrations (septel). In previous meetings, government officials had stressed their willingness to comply with the Special Envoy's framework, and had invited USAID and the U.S. Embassy to liaise with the government to encourage communication and joint monitoring. Following two weeks of unsuccessful telephonic requests by USAID officers for a meeting with HAC officials, Ahmed Adam has agreed to meet with USAID on May ¶31. In addition, direct communication between the Office of the Special Envoy and GOS Presidential Advisor Dr. Ghazi Salahudin (recently empowered with the leading role on the Darfur portfolio) has resulted in what would appear to be a renewed commitment by the GOS to fast track the entry of new NGOs and resolve humanitarian access issues in Darfur. Post will follow up with the MFA and the HAC in the hope that this GOS pledge will result in concrete, operational improvements. Post also plans to meet HAC Commissioner-General Hassabo to encourage improvement on the framework, as well as promote communication between the U.S. Government and GNU.

ASQUINO